

Israel's serious COVID-19 cases hit all-time high of 1,229

Interior Minister Shaked tests positive for virus; WHO official says new Omicron subvariant BA.2 is three times as infectious as original Omicron strain

The number of patients hospitalized in Israel in serious condition as a result of COVID-19 rose to 1,229 on Saturday, the highest number since the onset of the pandemic, according to new Health Ministry data.

The last time the number of serious patients was close to that figure was in late January 2021, with 1,193 serious COVID-19 cases.

The ministry reported 37,985 new cases identified Friday, with a test positivity rate of 25.48%. Another 15,304 cases had been identified as of 9 p.m. Saturday.

The transmission rate (measuring the average number of people each infected person spreads the virus to) continued to fall, reaching a value of 0.88. The transmission rate is based on data from 10 days earlier and any value below 1 shows that the pandemic is shrinking.

With Israel's COVID-19 death toll at 9,135, Prof. Eran Segal, a computational biologist at the Weizmann Institute and a top government adviser, noted on Channel 12 that 1 in every 1,000 Israelis had now died of COVID.

That puts Israel 47th in the world for deaths per capita, he said. In the US, the per capita death rate is almost three times as bad.

Recent days have seen daily deaths hovering at around 50.

Some 2 million Israelis have tested positive in the current Omicron wave, Segal said. About 900 people have died during the wave — which underlines that Omicron is less deadly than previous waves, with 1 fatality per 2,000 confirmed cases.

Segal predicted that within a week, serious cases would stand at 1,050-1,250, with daily infections hovering at 30,000-40,000.

Also on Saturday, Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked tested positive for COVID-19. Shaked had taken a personal antigen test just before a planned interview with Channel 12 news, when she tested positive.

“The minister is feeling well,” her office said, adding that she would conduct an additional test at an official testing station, according to Health Ministry guidelines.

On Friday, the cabinet voted to approve a rollback in requirements for the Green Pass, further easing COVID restrictions alongside a slowdown in the Omicron-led wave.

Starting on Monday, Israelis will no longer have to flash their Green Passes — which show proof of vaccination, recovery or a recent negative COVID-19 test — to enter restaurants, movie theaters, gyms and hotels.

The new Green Pass is valid for all those who have either recovered or received two doses of the vaccine in the past four months, and anyone who has received three or four doses at any time.

Proof of a valid Green Pass will still be required upon entry to indoor sites where there is a higher risk for infection, such as event halls and dance clubs.

The cabinet also approved the removal of “Purple Pass” requirements at commercial sites that required businesses to limit capacity at stores, and the removal of the requirement to keep a 1.5-meter (5-foot) space between tables at restaurants.

The new rules will remain in place until March 1.

As health officials worry over the possible dangers posed by the new highly contagious Omicron sub-variant BA.2, Channel 12 news reported that Dr. Dorit Nitzan, emergency manager to the World Health Organization in Europe, had shared data showing that the new strain was three times more contagious than the original BA.1 variant, which itself was previously the most contagious variant.

While she did say that according to the latest data, vaccines are still effective in protecting against serious illness, she also noted that “caution must still be maintained” and that there was still a risk in lifting certain restrictions.

On Wednesday, Dr. Sharon Alroy-Preis, who serves as head of public health services at the Health Ministry, said during a meeting of the Knesset Health Committee that about 300 cases of the new variant have been detected in Israel so far, primarily among people returning from abroad.

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